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ABSTRACT

In the Northern Plains of the United States, 100% of Indian reservations are affected by alcohol related problems. Approximately 90% of Native American adults are currently alcohol users or abusers or are recovering from alcohol abuse. Alcohol consumption has a devastating effect on the unborn. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is an irreversible birth defect that is most likely to occur when a pregnant woman abuses alcohol. A child with FAS is born mentally retarded with deformed facial features and some physical malformations. FAS is detected at birth and affects about 1 in every 100 Native Americans born in the Northern Plains. A related disorder is Fetal Alcohol Effected (FAE) which affects 1 in 50 Native Americans. FAE is a lesser degree of birth defect, with the effects being below average IQ, learning disabilities, hyperactivity, short attention span, and possibly the same physical malformations as FAS. FAE children are usually not detected until they enter school and are often seen as children with disciplinary problems. They are treated as behavioral disordered before being diagnosed with FAE. Both FAS and FAE are indicators of community distress. Forty percent of all Native American women drink alcohol during pregnancy, and are at risk of giving birth to children suffering from FAS or FAE. Within two to three generations, every Native American household will have one spouse who is a descendant of a fetal alcohol birth, if current trends are not reversed. The paper briefly describes the groups and organizations of Native American women who are making efforts to bring awareness of this issue to both Indian communities and educators. (ALL)

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Fetal Alcohol Syndrome "Chemical Genocide"

by Charon Asetoyer

Along with the many negative things such as the introduction of venereal disease that came to the Western Hemisphere with Columbus and his many followers, we can also credit the Europeans with the introduction of alcohol to our native people.

Alcohol has had a long and devastating history among the native Americans of the Western Hemisphere. Alcohol was used to intimidate, threaten, bereave, bluff, swindle and manipulate Native Americans, into relinquishing their lands, their culture and most of all to disintegrate a strong healthy nation. It has preyed on the vulnerability and innocence of the strongest people in all existence. Alcohol was used by the Europeans as a strategy to perpetuate genocide on an unsuspecting nation, and the U.S. Government has used alcohol against Native Americans to control and manipulate; it has been legal, illegal and then legalized again at the whim of Presidents. The Native American people are now experiencing alcohol's most devastating threat to their culture, more than ever before. It is being used to perpetuate a form of covert genocide, while the United States Government turns its head and chooses to ignore the destruction it is doing to the future generations of Native Americans.

In the Northern Plains, 100% of the Native American reservations are affected by alcohol and problems related to alcoholic use and abuse. Approximately 90% of the adult population are currently users, abusers, or recovering alcohol. As a result of the high alcohol use and abuse, there is also a high incidence of emotional, physical and sexual abuse as well as physical abuse of children and a high incidence of family violence. Often children grow up in violent surroundings, are neglected, are poorly nourished, and as a result grow up with many handicaps because of these experiences. Foster care is often a reality for these children of alcoholised environments, and many times it is the children from these alcoholic homes who are left without parents because of alcohol-related illness or accidents.

The issue of alcohol among Native Americans is not romantic or sensational, and only too often it is left out of the international scene as an issue of importance. Yet, alcohol consumption is having the most negative and

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Typical sight at Indian reservation. Photo: Echoes at Wounded Knee.

devastating effect on the most innocent and defenceless of all our Native American people, the unborn!

I am referring to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is an irreversible birth defect which occurs when, and only when, a pregnant woman drinks alcohol during pregnancy. FAS is broken into two (2) categories;

The first category is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome where the effects are mental retardation, deformed facial features (such as a flat facial appearance, posterior rotation of the ears, small head circumference, absence of the vermillion groove between the nose and lips and a carp-shaped mouth) and physical deformation such as stiff joints in the hands, arms, hips and legs. FAS is detected at birth. FAS affects about 1 in every 100 Native Americans born in the Northern Plains.

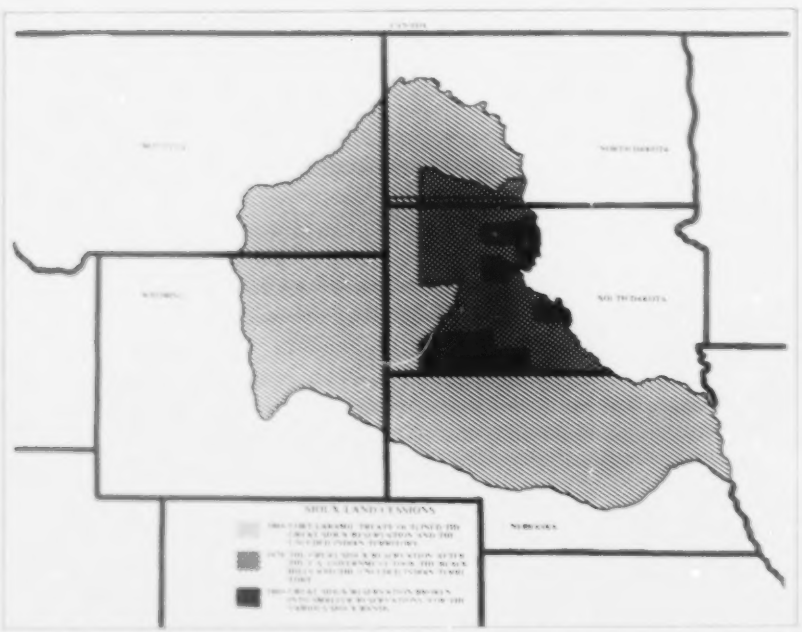
The other category is called Fetal Alcohol Effected (FAE) and affects 1 in every 50 Native Americans born in the Northern Plains. FAE is a lesser degree of birth defect than FAS. But do not underestimate it. The effects of FAE is a below-average range IQ(intelligence quotient), learning disabilities, hyperactivity, short attention span and may be accompanied by some of the same physical defects that the FAS child suffers from. FAE children are usually not detected until they enter school and are often seen as children with disciplinary problems, with no motivation and are treated as behavioural problems before they are even diagnosed as suffering from FAE.

Both Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and Fetal Alcohol Effected (FAE) is an indicator of a community and/or Nation in distress. Forty (40%) percent of all women drink alcohol during pregnancy, and give birth to children suffering from either FAS or FAE. Often times these children will end up in foster care homes or other facilities due to the incapacitation or death of the mother owing to alcoholism. It is indicated that within 2 1/2 to 3 generations, every Native American household in the Northern Plains area will have one spouse being a descendant of a fetal alcohol birth.

What does this mean for the future of a Nation (tribe)? For the existence of a culture? The quality of a Nation's (tribe's) leadership is derived from its people, and the vulnerability of a Nation (tribe) lies in its leadership.

Fetal Alcohol births are not limited to Native Americans, it can and does occur in every race. In fact, most Third World countries where women drink alcohol have a high rate of alcohol births.

As women of Indigenous populations it is time for us to deal with this situation, not only at a local level but at an international level. Coming together at an international conference or meeting would definently be a step towards a solution. To complicate the issue even more, there are inter-



Map showing Sioux Land Concessions in the Northern Plains.

national agencies and foundations that fund alcohol production projects as a means of economic development. These projects are usually headed by women who have no knowledge of the effects of alcohol drinking during pregnancy, nor have access to this information. It is time to come together as Indigenous women to discuss this issue, and to set moral conduct policies for international agencies and foundations that perpetuate such conduct. These international agencies and foundations need to evaluate the effects of funding alcohol production projects on the cultures they are involved with. This is an international issue which needs our input as Indigenous women in order to bring out a solution. We need to bring forth the true intentions of their actions, and define to them their limitations on our cultures.

History has made some strong statements on the issue of alcohol drinking among women during pregnancy: In 322 BC, Aristoteles was quoted as saying: "Foolish, drunken hair-brained women most often bring forth children like themselves: morose and languid". In the Book of Judges (13:7) in the Bible, an Angel visits the wife of Manoah, to tell her she will bear a child but warns, "Behold, thou shalt conceive and bear a son, and now drink no wine or strong drink". These historical quotes definitely lead us to regard Europeans as suspect, playing a part in the history of alcoholism among indigenous people.

Whenever a group of colonialist endeavors are about to be launched, you can rest assured there have been, and will continue to be, alcohol present in large quantities. Usually justified as medicinal, for purposes of breaking the ice with the natives... In reality it is used to penetrate a culture and apply the first modes of control.

However, there are a few groups and organizations of Native American Women in the United States, who are working for bringing awareness of FAS into their communities. One of these organizations is the Native American Community Board (NACB), located on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. Through their efforts, members of the NACB were able to get Bill 1310 introduced into State Legislation. Bill 1310 is the mandatory posting of the dangers of drinking alcohol during pregnancy, wherever alcohol beverages are sold or served in South Dakota. Through the efforts of Donna Haukaas, Jackie Rouse, and Charon Asetoyer, a legislative strategy was put into motion, testimony was presented, and Bill 1310 became reality in 1986.

The same group of women were able to bring awareness over the importance of better-prepared future educators (teachers) on (FAS). Through their efforts, the curriculum of FAS was incorporated into a cross-cultural education class at the University of South Dakota. This course on Cross Cultural Education is mandatory for all students preparing to go into the teaching field. Members of the NACB attended the U.N. Decade of Women Conference in Nairobi, and were invited by the Kakombo (Lou Tribe)

Native American children at play

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